

THE NEW HERMENEUTIC AND THE SERMON AS AN ART FORM:
A DISCUSSION OF THE SERMON ENLIGHTENED BY THE NEW
HERMENEUTIC THEOLOGIANS AND A PHILOSOPHY
OF ARTISTIC COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The thesis of this paper is that the sermon is best informed by the New Hermeneutic and the arts related to oral communication. In different languages, New Hermeneutic theologians and theologian-philosophers of art make the same points when their discussions are focused on the art form of the sermon. The New Hermeneutic provides a theology of preaching which illuminates what is supposed to happen in a sermon. A study of the sermon as expressive form helps the preacher to understand how to make that happen. Taken together, these two disciplines provide a complete framework for the preacher. This paper does just that! It reviews the New Hermeneutic and the sermon as art, intergrating the disciplines of systematic theology and preaching as expressive art.

A practical problem suggested by this thesis is how a sermon can educate a congregation to current theological issues and yet remain true to its distinctive art form.

Included are examples of sermons that have been preached which met the requirements of the New Hermeneutic and achieved artistic appreciation and at the same time dealt with the aforementioned current issues.

PREFACE

I have been a student at the School of Theology for a long time. When my husband and I were very young adults and were counseling youth at the church next door, I took a summer workshop from Paul Irwin and Ross Snyder. That was in 1960, and I was 26 years old. Today it is 1978, and I am middle aged. In a very real sense, I "grew up" here. Many people at STC have taught, influenced, and nurtured me. No statement could ever suggest the extensive debt I owe to the faculty and students of this institution.

I hope that Harvey Seifert, Paul Irwin, Tom Trotter, and John Cobb know what their friendship and guidance have meant to me and what a difference they have made in my life.

To Jane Douglass, my deep appreciation for her thoughtful guidance of my work at STC, for her brilliance and excitement as a teacher, and for accepting me as a woman contemporary and friend who had something of her own to contribute.

I thank Henry Kuizenga, Eckhardt Muehlenberg, and Jack Coogan for their contributions to my education; John Rice and Barry Woodbridge whose theses I stirred up and boiled together; and Joe Hough for holding my hand in the real world of school politics.

But most of all, I am grateful to my family--to

Robin, Christi, Richard, and Kathy and especially to my husband Bud--for their support and encouragement. A long time ago, while at dinner, Richard looked up at his Dad and asked him if I was going to get an "A" on the paper that was currently being written and that was spread all over the living room. "Yes, Richard," Bud answered, "your mother will undoubtedly get an 'A'; your mother is a very good student--not much of a wife," he added looking at me, "but a very good student." Today, this most wonderful of all husbands and our four outstanding teenagers affirm that it is O.K. for me to be a good student and a good minister, and they have made me feel like a good wife and mother, too. Who could ask for anything more?

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this paper is that the New Hermeneutic theologians and theologian-philosophers of art make parallel and similar points when their discussions are focused on the sermon. They may use different languages, but their thrusts hit essentially the same target. They agree that the sermon must use a particular language, authentic and artistic, to communicate. If the sermon does so with authority, the sermon has the power to bring the Word of God into being. Henry Kuizenga agrees: "The New Hermeneutic is precisely the philosophy and theology of preaching that asks for, yea demands, the art form in producing sermons. The whole phenomenological basis of the New Hermeneutic in the later Heidegger is telling us that the human response to being addressed by Being is found to be artistic, ultra-conceptual."¹ If that is the case (and this paper will argue that it is), then the sermon becomes an artistic form. A practical problem suggested by this thesis is how a sermon can educate the congregation to the current theological issues and remain true to this distinctive art form.

The disciplines of preaching and theology are brought

¹Henry Kuizenga, Notes on a paper to this student, November 14, 1977.

to bear on communicating the faith in this present age to a critical, educated, and skeptical congregation. We are in an age of renewed popularity of a more simplistic evangelism. For those to whom these popular, evangelistic, simplistic answers and cliches are a stumbling block to faith, it becomes even more crucial to wrestle with the issues in an honest and questioning manner. To this flock, one might almost define evangelism as redefining and confronting the tough theological issues.² Part of the reason this is the case is that the liberal or mainline Protestant churches have not done a good job in their theological education over the past forty years.

The problem is a crucial one for the congregation as well as for the minister who wants to bring the people along in their theological education. We live in our meanings. Our deepest convictions do, ultimately, make a difference in our lives. What our congregations believe about God, Jesus, the Trinity, and the Bible, not what they recite, but what they really believe, does matter. Therefore, it is crucial that these basic elements of the faith are dealt with self-consciously and specifically and thoroughly. The sermon, it will be argued, is a particular art form. If the preacher is to deal with current theological issues, it must be done within that art form. The sermon is not a lecture! The lecture is always a possibility, of course; but the

²An oft-made point of Harvey Seifert, among others.

Sunday Worship Service is the congregation gathered. Here is where the people will primarily be exposed to the faith and ought to be called upon to examine, stretch, and accept or reject, deepen or deny, their beliefs. Both the New Hermeneutic theologians and the philosophers of art will help us to see how this is possible.

The major areas that this project will address are the contributions of the New Hermeneutic to preaching and a description of the sermon as an art. Finally, two sermons illustrative of disciplined exegesis, elucidation of the text and the faith, illumination of the contemporary situation, and proclamation of Christian grace are included.

Throughout the ages, the Church has attempted to define its beliefs. The various creeds are the results of people in different situations in history structuring their faith. Many of these creeds no longer speak to men and women today. The frame of reference is different, the language no longer communicates truth or reality, and some of the statements can no longer be made with integrity. And yet, if what we believe makes a difference, and I believe that it does, then helping members of the congregation to sharpen their beliefs, to write their creeds, is essential. Too often we assume that since the minister has worked out the problem in her/his own mind, the congregation has as well. This is not a valid assumption. Sometimes it is even questionable that the pastor has the problem in hand! But better to

expose our vulnerability and be open to the problems in our faith than to be mushy and sentimental in our theology.

One of the major vehicles the pastor has for doing theology with the people is congregational worship, specifically the sermon. The problem then is to not distort the sermon, a witness to the Word of God, into a lecture. This raises important questions. What is a sermon? Why is preaching important? Can the sermon be used as a medium for instruction? How can the preacher succeed in both instructing and inspiring at the same time?

The sermon is not a lecture, not even a lecture on our historical faith. The sermon is not a lesson, not even a lesson on the virtues of the faith. The sermon is a witness to the Word of God. Preaching the Word of God is an art form which elucidates Scripture and problems of faith and at the same time inspires and challenges people to action or to a particular way of life. The sermon is an art form. It differs from a lecture in the same way that prose or poetry differ from merely descriptive or discursive language. The position will be taken in this paper that so long as the sermon remains true to its art form, it can also educate the people in their history and involve them in the current debates over the theological problems of the faith.

My thesis is that an artistic sermon can and should deal with contemporary theological issues. The preacher should attempt to instruct the people in their own doctrinal

history, to give our congregations a feeling of why such beliefs are important, and to give them a sense of ownership and caring about these beliefs. The major theological thrust that is brought to bear on the understanding of the sermon is the contemporary movement known as the New Hermeneutic. This thrust on the contemporary theological scene has done more than anything else to reclaim the importance of the sermon in the life of the church. It tackles head-on the problem of restating our beliefs and recapturing the spirit of the Scriptures in a relevant, contemporary, yet faithful manner. The word "hermeneutic" means to speak, to translate, to interpret. In a theological context, it includes exegesis and interpretation. Exegesis is the process whereby one explores what the text meant to the author and his/her readers. Interpretation is developing the meaning that the same text might have for this present age. Hermeneutics is determining the rules to use in order to get from exegesis to interpretation.

The New Hermeneutic might best be understood as a movement which attempts to come to grips with the inter-relatedness of language, translation, and exegesis and their bearing on the illumination and interpretation of Scripture. The description of the movement as the "New" Hermeneutic is to say that the old hermeneutic had largely emphasized exegesis only. The new movement takes the historicity of humanity, the human situation in history, seriously. Therefore

it elevates the study of speech and translation, the more historic dimensions of interpretation, along with commentary. It questions the old presupposition that the structures of reality are always the same. The new movement sees language as the key to existence for human culture and therefore as the key to a culture's attempt to understand itself.³

We live in a different world from that of New Testament times. No longer can we assume understanding of the Scriptures. The art of allegory is insufficient. Therefore, before we interpret these Scriptures, we must attempt some understanding of the writer's original intention. The "New" Hermeneutic tries to be aware of the pitfalls of such an attempt and is self-conscious about its assumptions and presuppositions. The New Hermeneutic insists upon theological reflection on the past and attempts to find valid contemporary meaning in the ancient texts. This may mean using very fresh and even shocking images in order to communicate the point that Paul or the Gospel writers made two thousand years ago.

There is, of course, a great deal of material on both the New Hermeneutic and the Sermon. This project is not an original treatise on either discipline but rather a summary of the best work and the most recent thinking on these two very important subjects to the contemporary mainline Protestant

³This discussion from Paul J. Achtemeier, An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969); and James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., The New Hermeneutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

churches. However, perhaps by the juxtaposition of hermeneutics and preaching some insights are achieved. By putting the two discussions side by side, it is suggested that the New Hermeneutic theologians and philosophers of art and students of the sermon are making parallel, even identical, points. Indeed, they are essentially saying the same thing although using different languages. The point for the preacher carries a triple whammy! One cannot preach the Scriptures by simply translating or allegorizing, and one cannot preach grace and salvation with merely discursive language, and one cannot deal with theological issues in the sermon in the same manner as the classroom lecture. Much more is required of the sermon. By looking even briefly at the New Hermeneutic and at the concepts of artistic communication, the student preacher may gain some insights into what those requirements might be and how their fulfillment might be achieved.

This project will integrate the disciplines of systematic theology and preaching. Actually, both subjects, hermeneutics and the sermon, relate to both the theoretical and the practical disciplines. Hermeneutics begins in the theological, philosophical arena and ends in homiletics. The sermon begins with biblical exegesis and ends in preaching. The entire field of religion and the arts is related if we consider the sermon as an art form and because the sermon is set within the artistic framework of the service of worship.

The method used in this project is largely library research and personal reflection. There are two sermons used as illustrations and analyzed from the perspective of this paper. One is that of Joseph Hough, Dean of the School of Theology at Claremont.⁴ The second is my own.⁵

In a lecture Ronald E. Osborn says about all theologians:

We have chosen not to clue the people in to the real issues. For two generations, for example, seminarians have used biblical criticism as standard equipment--in their seminary classes. But once ordained to the pastorate, they have reserved it for their own private study and occasional references in ministerial meetings and have studiously avoided informing the people. Laymen who have listened to enlightened ministers for a lifetime have been left with an essentially fundamentalist approach to the Bible if they take it seriously or with an inchoate suspicion that modern man just cannot do much with the Scriptures after all. In the same way we have avoided most of the other genuine theological issues.⁶

I agree. In this project, I hope to show that such need not be the case. Preachers can, within the artistic framework of the sermon, educate their members as well as bring the Word of God into being as an immediate experience.

⁴See Chapter IV, p. 50.

⁵See Chapter IV, p. 63.

⁶Ronald E. Osborn, "The Significance of the Reformation for the Contemporary Church--A Protestant View," Encounter XXIX:1 (Winter 1968), 18.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

Definition

The word "hermeneutic" in its most general sense means translation or interpretation. As human beings, we are involved with hermeneutics continually. Every moment we interpret sense data, experiences, and language. We continually translate our everyday environment in order that conversations and encounters make sense to us. If something unfamiliar is introduced, this process of interpretation becomes even clearer. By such a process, we are able to make something that is "foreign, strange, separated in time, space or experience become familiar, present, and comprehensible."¹ This process becomes even more evident when translating ancient texts such as classical Greek literature, the Bible, or the entire body of corpus juris for modern usage. In such an exercise, the need for interpretation becomes much more obvious and it is important that we become self-conscious about the process.

The word "hermeneutic" comes from the Greek word, "hermeneia," which can be broadly translated "to interpret."

¹Barry A. Woodbridge, "The Preacher as the Shepherd of Existence (Unpublished D. Min. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, June 1973), Introduction.

The word includes three aspects: (1) speech (putting the obscure into language), (2) translation (moving from a foreign language into one's own tongue), and (3) commentary (making obscure language clear and understandable).²

The Greeks used the word "hermeneia" to refer to the priest's interpretations of the proclamations from the gods. The word, therefore, carries the implication of sensitivity to the numinous. Hermeneutics suggests clarification of the mystical and obscure. We might liken this to an interpretation of "speaking tongues" where such an interpretation has a revelatory character.³ The general thrust of the word "hermeneutic" carries with it the whole idea of "illumination," and this concept of illumination plays a large role in the imagery of the New Hermeneutic. Hermeneutics, then, means translation, not simply of words but of meanings, translation of ideas from one culture to another.

Within the context of theology, hermeneutics includes exegesis and interpretation. Exegesis is the art and discipline of discovering what the text meant to its author and the author's readers. Literary and historical criticism, including stylistic analysis, study of the relationship of form to meaning and understanding of the complete historical setting, plays a major role in exegesis. One must "dig out"

²James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., The New Hermeneutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 6.

³Ibid., p. 2.

what point the text was making in its time and place in order to make the same point in present language and to the present culture. Interpretation is the art of suggesting the meaning that the text might have for the present age.

The New Hermeneutic is that theological movement which declares that "hermeneutics, as the responsible movement from text to proclamation, is the encompassing context of all theology."⁴ The New Hermeneutic insists that we be self-conscious about this continual process of interpreting or translating our past.⁵ The hermeneutical question when applied to the Christian tradition is whether it is possible to put an ancient text such as the Bible at the basis of an affirmation of faith that is to be understood and taken seriously by modern man. How are we to reinterpret the Bible, Jesus, and the faith of the early church? Can past events and the texts which result from such events have any real significance for life now? These are fundamental questions for the Christian faith and for our contemporary congregations, and these are the questions that the New Hermeneutic puts into scholarly perspective. Unless the biblical texts and the kind of reality those texts point to can give meaning to our present reality, then there is no need or basis for Christian faith and theology. Therefore, the questions raised by the

⁴John B. Cobb, Jr., "Bible, Revelation and Christian Doctrine," also published as "The Authority of the Bible," Drew Gateway XLV:1-3 (1974-75), 2.

⁵Woodbridge, Preface.

New Hermeneutic are basically related to the question of the possibility of Christian faith in the modern world.⁶

The New Hermeneutic takes the "historicness of man and of his understanding" with ultimate seriousness.⁷ Hence it has elevated the language or speech and translation dimensions of hermeneutics, that is, these more historic dimensions of interpretation, to maximum importance. The New Hermeneutics insists that language, translation, and exegesis are all interrelated and that interpretation cannot be separated from criticism or exegesis. Rather, the prior question is, "How is understanding possible?" To answer this question, the contemporary philosophical and theological movement referred to as the New Hermeneutic has developed a theory about interpretation. For the New Hermeneutic, language is the key.

Language

The New Hermeneutic is, above all, a theological enterprise concerned with language. It is primarily concerned with how one approaches the word of God attested to in the Scriptures and then moves from that to a preached sermon in which God speaks anew. The New Hermeneutic focuses attention on the route between the Scriptural text and the contemporary proclamation, especially in the sermon.

⁶Paul Achtemeier, An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 13.

⁷Robinson and Cobb, p. 7.

The New Hermeneutic is aware that language itself is an interpretation; that is, the text itself is not an objective work which only needs the right key to elucidate it. But the original language, linguistic expression, speech is in itself a subjective expression. The text itself is an "initial interpretation"⁸ of the subject matter. Therefore, we should not attempt to seek the subject matter in intuitive immediacy apart from the language interpreting it. To do so is really not possible. Instead, the New Hermeneutic stresses

the positive and indispensable role of language in understanding. Rather than being a secondary distorting objectification of meaning that must be removed to free the meaning behind the language, the language of the text is regarded positively as an interpretive proclamation of that meaning and hence as our indispensable access to it.⁹

Likewise, to be really understood, the text itself needs to be translated into our vernacular, even given the finiteness of that language. Therefore, the New Hermeneutic is interested in linguistic expression or speech.

This understanding of language as itself interpretation is central in the New Hermeneutic and "one of its distinguishing characteristics."¹⁰

Language in the New Hermeneutic is not viewed as an objectification behind which one must move in establishing the understanding of existence objectifying itself therein. It is indeed not man at all who is expressing himself in language. Rather it is language itself that speaks.¹¹

⁸Ibid., p. 6. ⁹Ibid. ¹⁰Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹Ibid., p. 46 (in discussing Heidegger).

The basic thing about a text is not what the author intended to express in words by following up a given point of view. Rather, basic is what wills fundamentally to show itself and have its say prior to or apart from any subjective intent. The question to the text would then not be the question as to the [author's] perspective, but rather: "What shines forth in this text? What shows itself in this text?"¹²

The subject matter of which language speaks is primarily being. It is man's very nature to harken to the call of being. . . . In this way language is located at the center of man's nature, rather than being regarded primarily as an objectification of an otherwise authentic self understanding.¹³

Man's role is to respond linguistically and hence to respond to the "call of being." "Language is the arrival of being itself, both clearing and concealing";¹⁴ that is, human nature is bound up in the essence of language. "Language is the body of our spirit."¹⁵ Language is basic to our existence as humans. It is language which makes us human, which makes community possible, and which in turn is a basic function of culture. It is language which creates, differentiates, organizes, constitutes the human world. Language makes present all of reality. Through language, we grasp that reality. We experience the reality and depth of other human beings. The New Hermeneutic definition of language includes speech, sign, gesture, and silence. Language determines our human perception

¹²Helmut Franz quoted in *ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁴Gerhard Ebeling, God and Word (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 2.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

and hence the way we relate to the world. Language comes from God, from the creative thrust of the universe. The exact origin of language is unknown. Nevertheless, through it human beings make departure into Being; a person discovers his/her own and others' being.

Negative or inauthentic language produces estrangement and fragmentation. Positive or authentic language produces interrelatedness, unity, and understanding. Language then has an interesting relationship to reality. "It is one's use of language, then, that constitutes his world as either estranged and fragmented (inauthentic) or interrelated and united (authentic)."¹⁶ Truth is reality set into words, the reality of the mystery of life, the reality of the freedom of humankind. False language corrupts and binds people. It is important then that the sermon or proclamation of the Word of God speak the freeing (Goding) word. "Authentic words challenge one to consider another, more satisfying way of constituting his world. Language that is true to the potentiality for unity in existence (and unity is a condition in which love prevails) is, for the New Hermeneutic, the Word of God."¹⁷ Such language, called the Word of God, brings unity to existence and a life of love prevails. "It is in words and language that things first come into being and are."¹⁸

¹⁶Barry A. Woodbridge, "Preaching as a Subversive Act," Christian Century XCI:5 (February 6, 1974), 143.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Woodbridge, "The Preacher as Shepherd . . . ," p. 55.

Human language, therefore, should uncover their being and preserve them in such a state of being uncovered.

Language, then, besides creating our world, has the power to restructure the world, to make something present which was absent. Every creative possibility is brought about by language since it is only through language that humankind has a future. Language opens the future and makes the future a present possibility. Imagination is the only means for the future to be reached or touched and imagination is dependent on language. Furthermore, humans are not masters of their language. Language determines our very being, but we do not create it nor are we able to completely control our language. And yet, we are laden with the responsibility of handling the language responsibly. We are accountable for our use of language. The New Hermeneutic understands this problem to be the basic human situation. The word which makes us free, which presents the truth, which opens the future is a gift, an event of language. God is that event.

This might appear to lead to an assumption that God is language. Since we deal with the mystery of reality in the language situation and because the word-situation is defined as God, this means that God can also be defined as the mystery of reality.¹⁹

As we uncover something about the meaning of the word "God," we say something about ourselves at the same time. God

¹⁹Ebeling, pp. 28-31.

includes us, embraces us, concerns us.²⁰

The Text

The purpose of this hermeneutical approach is to disclose the truth of the human situation. This situation is to be described in the word-event, and this word-event is to open or to present possibilities for the text to illumine our human situation and thereby to increase our understanding.²¹

For the New Hermeneutic, a single repetition of the text is never sufficient.

The genius of the New Hermeneutic movement resides in its denial of the sufficiency of past interpretations of Christianity and affirmation that true interpretation and understanding happen only where there is a word-event, an event of performative language which renews the claim of the text on the listener or reader.²²

Heidegger calls this speaking the "essential word."²³ This "essential word" is the uncovering of reality, the naming of what is. Although it is important for everyone to be responsible in the use of language, it is particularly important for the poet and the preacher.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Buford Allen Dickenson, "The Hearing of the Word" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1976), p. 35.

²²Barry A. Woodbridge, "The Role of Text and Emergent Possibilities in the Interpretation of Christian Tradition" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1976), p. 3.

²³Woodbridge, "The Preacher as Shepherd . . . ," p. 55.

As well as stressing the importance of the language, the New Hermeneutic emphasizes the importance of asking the right questions of the text. The movement understands that one cannot eliminate one's subjectivity as a source of prejudice, and therefore the emphasis is on whether one is "asking the right questions, whether his concern is with the ultimate."²⁴ One approaches the text as two subjects interacting, as one would develop an "I-Thou" relationship. The text's and the interpreter's view of life merge. One should keep oneself "ready, open, free. Or better, keep himself questioning."²⁵

One determines the opening up of a text by the questions asked. The extent of our understanding of the text will then be determined by the quality of the questions we ask. These questions ought to concern existence, estrangement, truth, and freedom. The New Hermeneutic realizes that since we approach the text, we do indeed determine what we want from the text. Therefore, because the text is not an object, it does not speak by itself; but we must be careful to really listen. It is this quality of dialoging with the text, this process of discovery and then that discovery leading to further questioning that is called the hermeneutical circle. Only by continual questioning and authentic listening can one avoid submerging the text completely into one's own

²⁴Robinson, p. 23.

²⁵Bultmann, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 42.

subjectivity. The text is treated as an independent proclamation, but it no longer stands over against one as complete authority. We are involved with the text in this hermeneutical circle and we hear with the ears of our age. The text does not stand alone. Dr. Barry Woodbridge describes this hermeneutical circle as the "dialectic interaction between one's anticipated understanding and understanding that actually occurs."²⁶ Involved in this dialogue is a thorough study of the text using all the disciplines of biblical criticism. The more we know, the more we are able to ask of the text. Gadamer uses the image of "melting horizons" to describe this phenomenon. Our involvement with the text becomes an illuminating experience, and we are as interpreted by the text as the text is interpreted.²⁷

God

As we have suggested in the section relating to language, one of the concerns of the New Hermeneutic is to reintroduce the word "God" in a manner acceptable to modern scholarship and philosophy. All of this discussion about the importance of language points to the fact that the New Hermeneutic does indeed identify God with language. God is this language upon which we are so dependent.

²⁶Barry Woodbridge, personal communication, 16 July 1977.

²⁷Eckehard Muehlenberg, personal communication, 14 July 1977.

As we mentioned in the previous discussion of language, God is defined as the mystery of reality. In the word-event, this God addresses us and demands that we be the receiver and act responsibly. Neutrality is not tolerated.²⁸ We are not masters of our own language, and hence we are not masters of ourselves. If we recognize this and proclaim this, we give expression to that which makes free and that which sets right. This existentialist position asserts that there is no adequate representation of God. Ebeling suggests that traditional representations of God (the bearded father, the Trinitarian man) and the metaphysical concepts of God (ens realissimum, causa sui) and even Jesus' pictures of God (the Father) are all misleading.

Representations of God, to be sure, give expression to that which is meant by the word "God" only to the extent that they present man to God, and thus awaken man to his basic situation. The moment the word situation of which we have spoken is abandoned and God is regarded in one way or another as reality, rather than as the mystery of reality which lays exacting hold upon us, then God is murdered.²⁹

This approach of the New Hermeneutic is very different from pietism or moralism. The emphasis on speaking responsibly, especially in the context of the term "God," has broader implications than simply being conscientious. It includes our way of dealing with God and other people. It does not mean being puritanical, sober, or straight-laced.

²⁸Ebeling, p. 31.

²⁹Ibid.

Emergence of the
New Hermeneutic

By the end of the seventeenth century, critical scholarship developed a renewed interest in the analogical interpretation of Scripture. These scholars had keen interest in the historical or archetypal origins of the stories and in their literary forms. The problems of allegory, typology, prophecy, and the links between the Old and New Testaments were treated. Symbolism throughout the Bible became apparent. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the "old" hermeneutical approach had restricted itself to only exegesis. There was a narrowing of the definition of the hermeneutical problem to that of reproduction or re-experiencing past forms. This era or school of hermeneutics used the categories of philological resources and historical setting in order to explain the text. The major emphasis was placed on translation, which was narrowly based on philology and stressed the usage of the lectionary, syntax, and grammar for its explanations. By now, hermeneutics had lost the concept of the interrelatedness of speech, translation, and commentary and had become the theory of exegesis only. Understandably, the discipline of hermeneutics was caught up in the spirit of the times, the age of the scientific approach. Strong emphasis was placed on scientific investigation and intellectual mastery over the subject matter, putting the text into an "I-It" relationship. Categories were imposed on the text.

There was no attempt to understand the deeper meaning of the Scripture, to let the verses speak directly without the imposition of some preconceived idea, at least not in any serious or self-conscious manner.

As the interest in critical scholarship and in the debate about the critical historical method of interpretation intensified, the traditional approach to hermeneutics became too sterile, too fragmented, and too specialized. It had lost the ability to be an art and hence could not communicate what was of greatest importance. The year 1930 marks the end of this epoch.³⁰

Another difficulty that the contemporary theologian has with all of the past approaches to interpreting Scripture is that they make the assumption that the structure of reality is always the same, that human nature never changes, and that because of continuity in our traditional structure of faith, correct or helpful interpretation of the Scriptures is possible. Today such an assumption simply cannot be made.

The same scholarship which has made the Bible intelligible has also made alien to us those portions which once seemed most immediately accessible and relevant. We can no longer find in the New Testament the normative statement of eternal moral and spiritual truths which need only to be proclaimed again in every generation. Much of what once appeared to be of this character now is seen as inextricably tied to eschatological and Christological beliefs which are profoundly strange to us.³¹

³⁰See, for example, Robinson and Cobb, p. 19 and Actemeier, Chapter 1.

³¹Cobb, pp. 1-2.

We live in a different world and we can no longer pretend that we understand the New Testament. The word "God" is a puzzlement. And yet, an affirmation of our historical roots is necessary or there is no purpose in identifying ourselves as Christian. For these reasons, along with the philosophical development in the study of language and hermeneutics, there has been great interest in the problem of interpreting Scripture. Indeed, this discussion has been thrust to center stage of the current theological drama. The New Hermeneutic comes out of the wings of these traditions and suggests a deeper and broader approach. Without bypassing any of the previous stages of interpretation, indeed with a new grasp of the proportions and nature of the hermeneutical task, these scholars ask us to "listen" to the text in a way that we can also experience it. We are to remove all obstructions and then go beyond all "explanations" so that the text can "speak" directly to us. After an attempt at discovering the text's original intention, we must become existentially involved so that the text can then address itself to our life situation. The New Hermeneutic comes to grips with the problems of translation not only from one language to another, but more importantly, from one mind-set to another. These theologians recognize the historical structure of existence. They suggest a new awareness of the pitfalls in translation and a new self-consciousness about exegetical presuppositions. The New Hermeneutic suggests that

the solution to these problems is provided by language itself. Language is the key to humanity's existence. It is what defines us as human beings. Therefore, language is the key to our attempt to understand ourselves. "It is a central recognition of the New Hermeneutic that language itself says what is invisibly taking place in the life of a culture."³² The New Hermeneutic has returned to including, indeed focusing on, the art of interpretation. The New Hermeneutic "does not mean a theory of interpretation, but rather the process of interpretation itself."³³ And the focus in interpretation is "not in terms of understanding existence but rather in terms of language."³⁴ The hermeneutical movement today is open to new expressions, new forms in order to express the essence of the text.

To achieve this end the interpreter must turn attention away from the cognitive content of the text to its effect; its concern is that it scores the same point, or cuts the same way in our situation. This may even require the contradiction of the cognitive import of the text!³⁵

The New Hermeneutic goes beyond what information specialized philosophical resources provide and investigates the relation of language itself to the process of interpretation. This does not mean that the New Hermeneutic has dismissed or rejected the previously splintered disciplines of exegesis. Indeed, all the scholarly approaches are used in

³²Robinson, p. 39.

³³Ibid., p. 45.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Cobb, p. 2.

order to discover the point which the text makes. The practice is not at all simplified, but rather intensified. After all the scholarly research has been done, the further question then is asked, "How shall we understand this? How shall we sense the meaning and how shall we translate that meaning in order to communicate that today?"

Hermeneutics and Homiletics

This subchapter deals with the specific manner in which the New Hermeneutic relates to preaching. David Randolph and Manfred Mezger have provided the guides to structure this discussion. In order to see homiletics and hermeneutics tied together, we will look carefully at David Randolph's "Introduction to the New Hermeneutic" in a collection of Nine Sermons on Prayer³⁶ by Gerhard Ebeling and an article by Manfred Mezger, "Preparation for Preaching" in Translating Theology into the Modern Age.³⁷ Both of these men are important and respected proponents of the New Hermeneutic and authorities in the field of preaching.

In this introduction to a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer by Ebeling, David Randolph presents us with a fairly brief, concise, and well-organized outline of the New

³⁶David Randolph, "Introduction," in G. Ebeling, Nine Sermons on Prayer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

³⁷M. Mezger, "Preparation for Preaching," in Translating Theology into Modern Age (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

Hermeneutic movement. In his article, "Preparation for Preaching," Manfred Mezger sets out important guidelines for the preacher from the New Hermeneutic point of view. Drawing on these two pieces, we may have a clearer understanding of what is required of the preacher as determined by this recent movement in contemporary theology.

For the New Hermeneutic, preaching is of the utmost importance. "God seeks to speak to us not in writing but by word of mouth."³⁸ This is one of the underlying girders of the movement. It is obvious then that preaching is not just another means for communicating the gospel, but is THE WAY. The sermon is the criterion of theology and the central task of the ministry.

A second theme heard throughout the New Hermeneutic discussions is that theology and proclamation must be held together. They should not be independent studies. This is one reason that Luther is such a hero to the movement. Luther was an academician whose study enlightened his sermons and a preacher whose weekly proclamations made his studies relate to the real world of the parish. Surely, Luther, with his explicit emphasis on speech, announcing and proclaiming, and his insistence on the church as a "mouth house" not a "pen house," was renewing the pulpit and congregational worship in a similar manner to the New Hermeneutic school today.

³⁸Randolph, p. ix.

A third thrust is that the Bible is the basis for our historical Christian faith; those involved in the New Hermeneutic movement are convinced that the Bible can tell us what it means to be a human being in the modern world. Scriptures, though they be discourses from the past, provide the commission for and the content of proclamation. The problem, of course, is to make these Scriptures audible, sensible, and understandable today. The preacher must make the text "work faith and produce life."³⁹ To this end, the New Hermeneutic addresses itself.

Reality and Language

Ebeling makes the statement that "the hermeneutical task consists for theology in nothing else but in understanding the Gospel as addressed to contemporary man."⁴⁰ In order for Ebeling to overcome the tension between the Gospel and contemporary man, we must understand that for Ebeling, God and reality are not two different things. Theology makes no sense apart from real people and the real world. This is a very human-centered theology. The Christian belongs wholly to the world and wholly to Christ at the same time. There is not a conflict here. The Word of God embraces the reality of the world. Therefore, in a practical sense this means one

³⁹ Mezger, p. 159.

⁴⁰ G. Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 11.

does not compromise either the Word of God or the real world. One does not force the Word of God to agree with what one knows about the world. Mezger gives some concrete examples of this. We are not to stretch for allegorical or symbolic meanings that may stick very closely to the literal text but are apt to miss the deepest meaning of the text entirely. Now this may not be startling news to theologians, but it is a radical concept to the average parishioner. Furthermore, the every-growing evangelical church is a self-conscious movement away from this total approach. The New Hermeneutic, on the other hand, will not let us compartmentalize.

"Being" is not a fixed concept. Being is an occurrence. It happens to us, dawns on us.⁴¹ Being is founded in language, and the language does not simply point to a truth but actually brings to expression that which is. This too has practical implications for the preacher. Sermons should not be merely conceptual and academic, nor, on the other hand, merely ethereal, but rather concrete and real. The language of the sermon must bring life into being. If preaching is language which has something to say, "what is" emerges through that language. The human situation is revealed. We know where we stand, we are made aware. Real understanding takes place. The sermon is an event, not a series of concepts. According to Ebeling, Mezger, and others, if we really listen to reality, we will hear the Word of God.

⁴¹Randolph, p. 9.

Historic Nature of Humanity

The New Hermeneutic takes historical society with utmost seriousness. These theologians understand that our structures of reality are determined by our historical setting. This means that the worldly trappings of the Scriptures are not to be confused with the Gospel, and we must not let such trappings blur our communication of the faith.

Jesus Christ is the event which ends the domination of the past over man and sets him free to shape his future. Through Jesus Christ man knows that he is not at the mercy of supernatural forces and divine furies, but that he is responsible for the world. Freedom is the correlate of history, for to be an historical creature is to be free to choose one's past and to direct one's future.⁴²

Relating this to preaching, Mezger talks about the sermon as a language event that takes time and gives time. The sermon is the place where "we hear the language of a quite distinct, unmistakable voice breaking through in human speech."⁴³ The sermon, then, must be freed from the trappings of the past. It must speak the Word of God, the Gospel, afresh. It must make that Gospel real to the men and women of today. If the sermon does, indeed, do this, it will elucidate what is and what it means to be human today and, therefore, will make a future possible. An example of this might be using inclusive language and imagery. Although the New Hermeneutic theologians have not yet (or only very recently) realized this

⁴²Ibid., p. 11.

⁴³Mezger, p. 171.

themselves, one of the implications of the New Hermeneutic with its emphasis on the importance and power of language surely is that the feminists are correct in their insistence on new imagery and language that will abandon male dominance that now pervades.

Historic Nature of Scripture

Randolph and Mezger both deal with the historical levels of a text that the preacher must study in regard to the sermon. The first is the priority of the biblical text as it comes to us from the past. The texts themselves originated as sermonic materials, and they can and must become preaching again today.

Secondly, the text has a historical setting. Therefore, the preacher must make use of all of the disciplines of biblical exegesis. Before one can move to the act of proclamation, the preacher must do a thorough exegesis of the text in order to discover what the text is all about, to know what is there. "The closer the correspondence between exegesis and preparation for preaching, the more integrally and convincingly is the text disclosed to the listener. . . . So exegesis calls preaching to account with reference to its presuppositions."⁴⁴

The third level of study is the language of the original text. The preacher should attempt to understand the

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 161.

spirit of the language, the nuances and shadings involved. Mezger talks a great deal about translation. It is crucial in every sense. It is the backbone of the entire endeavor, the nerve center of all interpretation. For Mezger, it is extremely important that the preacher be involved in translating in order that one may hear a fresh speaking of the text. He suggests an almost savoring of the words in translation so that new insights are possible. "What is really important is to recognize the text's unique form, its historical particularity."⁴⁵ Then one does the broader part of translating. This "does not mean simply to substitute one word for another, but to seek and find at once the new place at which this text, without detriment to its historical individuality, meets us."⁴⁶ In order to approach this most difficult art of translation, Mezger suggests making several translations, recasting and remolding the passage into one's own language.

And since the immediate comprehension of the verbal context provokes interpretative activity, it is impossible to proceed with excessive precision at the first stage. It is the responsible transaction of having to exchange our coinage without thereby reducing its value. . . . Next to reading, translation is the most difficult art there is.⁴⁷

The fourth area to be explored is the tradition of interpretation. The preacher should consider the various translations that have already occurred and, if possible, the sequence--for example, Aramaic to Greek to Old English

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 166.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 165.

⁴⁷Ibid.

to English. Similarly, the various ecclesiastical traditions might be considered (i.e., Roman Catholic and Reformed). At this point, Mezger suggests as precise a translation as possible in order to appropriate the example of the concrete situation. Then one is able to concretize it anew today, and at the same time one can avoid simply making a hasty appropriation of what is assumed to be the "essential substance."⁴⁸

The fifth consideration that must be made is of the congregation to whom the text will be proclaimed. These are real people in a unique historical moment. Therefore, "timeless" truths are not required or appropriate. The preacher's listeners are not the same people to whom the Gospel was first proclaimed. The present congregation is, however, a group of people to whom the Gospel can now come! The preacher must again make the Gospel concrete, real, alive to the present situation. Mezger's presupposition is that Matthew's or Isaiah's words came to them, not from them. Hence the assertion "God spoke to me in this way" can be made again.⁴⁹

And finally, after this study and because of this careful preparation, the preacher can and must present the Word of God to the hearers. The preparation is not to "parade itself into the sermon, but to liberate the intention of the text to become contemporary address."⁵⁰ The Word must become

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 167.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Randolph, p. 13.

contemporary! Just as exegesis reminds preaching of its presuppositions, preaching reminds exegesis of its consequences. The sermon has to be real for us or it is wasted at best and possibly even detrimental at worst. The history must be ours, the incarnation a personal one, or it is no good. Preaching is to proclaim "your" God, "our" God, not a God.

The text is fully historical when through the sermon delivered in relation to it God speaks to contemporary men in their history and leads them into a new history. The sermon thus is not the cataloging of the past but the creation of a future.⁵¹

One thing seems certain and that is that the belief and the enthusiasm of the preacher are important if the proclamation is going to convince others, if faith is to be enabled to arise through faith.⁵² Indeed, for Mezger, faith is our purpose and faith is subjective! The biblical account is a witness to experience, and faith is needed to interpret that experience. It cannot be objectified. "Faith does not have any responsibility which can be made intelligible apart from faith."⁵³ Faith means involvement, and Mezger would have us hold fast to the "indisputable claim that faith only arises from faith, just as it is eternally true that love is only understood by love."⁵⁴

"Preparation for preaching must take all these into account together with the event of Christ which animates

⁵¹Ibid., p. 14.

⁵²Mezger, p. 164.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 165.

them."⁵⁵ Preaching must stay in touch with all of the theological disciplines. All theological problems affect preaching.

Whether we like it or not, preaching does encompass the whole spectrum: church history and doctrine, Old and New Testament studies, faith as well as conduct, worship as well as its place and order, instruction as well as pastoral administration of the word, the mission of the Church in the world as well as the attempt to understand man in his world.⁵⁶

"Preparation for preaching, then, is movement from the text to the actual act of proclamation."⁵⁷

Therefore it encompasses and probes the entire route by which the translation travels across the hiatus between what is necessarily remote and our life, and, as it takes care that what was spoken long ago will not merely be repeated, but will be spoken anew, it must demonstrate what understanding means, and must make clear how that which is understood is brought to expression--that is, how it can become communicable today to men who listen.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Randolph, p. 14.

⁵⁶Mezger, p. 162.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 160.

⁵⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER III

THE SERMON AS ART FORM

The New Hermeneutic has tremendous implications for the sermon, as we have seen. The movement directs most of its energies to the proclaiming of the Word of God. I will now turn to another approach to understanding the sermon, that of the artist. In the final chapters, we will see how these two approaches can be combined to offer the preacher some helpful insights.

Human beings communicate in essentially two different modes. The first is the mode of discursive, linear language. Vocabulary and syntax are the tools of this mode of communication and such a style suits our scientific (one plus one equals two) experience of reality very well. Such communication, however, does not do very well handling feelings or the deeper emotional aspects of human experience. Suzanne Langer discusses this phenomenon in detail, but in summary she says, "The limits of language are not the last limits of experience."¹ In fact, language even points to its own inadequacy. "I can't tell you how grateful I am." "Words cannot express my love for you." Such expressions are examples or symptoms of this phenomenon.

¹Suzanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (New York: New American Library, 1942), p. 224.

The second mode of communication is better able to deal with this depth dimension of human experience. This is the non-discursive mode that creates formal analogs for experience, or, in other words, art. Art forms can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and an accuracy and with truth where discursive language cannot. Such non-discursive, "significant forms" such as music, painting, sculpture, drama, poetry, etc., are not logically discriminated, but felt as a quality. They cannot be fully analyzed nor described with linear discursive language. But these "expressive forms can communicate feeling as well as content."²

An art piece has shape and form and is organized in time and space. Partially because of this analogy to our experience, the art work enables us to organize and to understand our own space and time better. The patterns of art are analogous to the patterns of our inner emotive life. The qualities of artistic forms which enable them to communicate meaning include abstraction, plasticity, and transparency.³

By abstraction we mean that the piece is divorced from reality sufficiently in order that it can take on new meanings, can become a symbol. This quality of art enables the symbol to become invested with futureness. Plasticity

²John Rice, "The Use of Expressive Form in Parish Ministry" (Unpublished Rel.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1975), p. 52.

³This discussion is based on Suzanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), pp. 59-60, and elaborated on by Rice, p. 76.

means the symbol can be shaped and changed, can take on new meanings. The transparent quality of art enables it to point beyond itself to its meaning. John Rice adds two more qualities to these mentioned by Langer. Rice's artistic qualities also include mystery and provisionality, both very important to the religious symbol. By mystery, Dr. Rice means that if symbols are to communicate the Holy Mysteries, they should have something of a quality of mystery about them. "Thou shalt not reduce the Holy Mysteries to the dominant tonic relationship!"⁴ By provisionality, Dr. Rice means that the symbol should point to the tension between what is and what might be. Since our proclamation of the Christian Gospel does not include having all the answers, our expressive forms ought to have a tentative quality about them. We need to leave room for surprises and for openness toward the future. This suggestion has tremendous implications for the sermon! If it is true, and I believe that it is, that the dimensions of grace exceed any rational explanation, then the sermon needs to leave room for existential contact between the people and that grace.

The point is that our deepest religious truths will not be communicated nearly so well by philosophical treatises or by ponderous lectures as they will by the various art forms. There is widespread agreement that the essence of the Christian

⁴Rice, p. 87, quoting Harold A. Knight, lecturer in Church Music, Bloy House Episcopal Seminary, circa 1972.

experience is the good news of God's grace.⁵ The point of the Gospel is that God's love is not earned. Such graceful love exceeds our sinfulness, and this redemptive love can transform our lives precisely at the point where we are certain it cannot. Our sermons ought to incorporate symbols that communicate this love of God that is not confined to our logical expectations or to our organizations or to our judgments. Such concepts as grace, the incarnation, and God's love are not "known" via a lecture, but in experience; and such experience is best related in expressive forms. John Rice says, "Even a traditional sermon can utilize non-discursive elements."⁶ This, I think, is not strong enough! A traditional sermon MUST utilize non-discursive elements for all of the reasons we have just stated! It is obvious from the above discussion that preaching, if this means to proclaim the Gospel, simply cannot be rational argument or debate or academic lecture. It must mean artistic proclamation of the Gospel and immediate communication of God's grace. Elton Trueblood suggests this same direction.

The difference between a sermon and a lecture is fundamentally a difference of aim. . . . Whereas a lecture has a subject, a sermon has an object. . . . It is not a sermon unless it is given in the hope of making a practical difference in the lives of the people who listen. The sermon is akin to art, in Aristotle's sense, in that it represents a "productive state of mind." It seeks to produce, to effect change, to alter the course

⁵Rice, p. 20, quoting John B. Cobb, Jr.

⁶Rice, p. 55.

of events. Always in one way or another, the purpose is new life.⁷

Trueblood goes on to explain that the gospel must appeal to and make sense to both our heads and our hearts. I agree. It is just for that reason that art, expressive form, can do this best.

The sermon, then, must become an expressive form of the incarnation and of grace. It must, in other words, communicate the Gospel, not just talk about it. The listeners must experience God's love, not hear it eulogized or simply described. Jack Coogan describes St. Paul as someone who does exactly this.

An enlightening example for your consideration is our friend St. Paul. Paul is a well trained rhetorician. He characteristically gets his arguments going in good syllogistic discursive style, and then when he hits a squishy spot, which usually doesn't take long at all, he bursts into poetry. And he does it so very well that you never know you've been had. Take I Corinthian 15, the argument on the resurrection from the dead. It starts out in discursive style, and then it suddenly, in some mysterious way, becomes a poem.⁸

I have also heard Jack Coogan say the same thing about Paul Tillich's theology.

Our problem, then, of course, is how the preacher can go about making sure s/he communicates grace and avoids lecturing. How does s/he convey meanings that are understood

⁷David Elton Trueblood, The Yoke of Christ and Other Sermons (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 9.

⁸Jack Coogan, Foundation for Preaching Class, quoted by Rice, p. 55.

and felt and avoid mere rational discourse? How does one handle communicating our history or deal with a theological problem and still preach an artistic sermon?

First of all, the proclamation is heard, not read. The sermon is not words on paper, but live, earnest words from the preacher's mouth: comforting, confronting, blessing, and proclaiming right then and there. It is an acoustical event! This is also a point that the New Hermeneutic makes very emphatically. What the preacher needs to remember is that s/he is a verbal communicator and needs all the articulation and dramatic skills of an actor.

Such seemingly basic techniques as eye contact and body movement that communicate energy cannot be overlooked. The preacher should practice the sermon, and the delivery should be energetic and well paced. Attention must be given to the voice, to pitch and volume. Is there variety? Can s/he be heard? Is the tempo slow enough to be understood and still be interesting? Does s/he know what s/he wants to say? Is there freedom to move around and to be spontaneous? Is the voice clear and natural? Delivery is hard work and cannot be slighted if the preacher is to illumine the existence of the people and not get in the way herself. In other words, the more effectively the message can be physically communicated, the more effectively the Gospel can be preached. These techniques are neither trivial nor phony manipulations. They relate in an integral way to the honest, authentic

proclamation for which we are striving. If the preacher is not excited, no one else will be. If the preacher does not believe, she will not be believable. The Gospel is not dull, neither should our proclamation be. How the sermon is proclaimed is as important as what is proclaimed.⁹ The word of God can hardly be effective if everybody is bored to death. Fortunately, if the preacher cares and is herself experiencing the graceful love of God, it is very unlikely that the congregation will be bored. Rather, in spite of whatever failings the preacher may have, the sermon will carry something of the "ex opere operato" experience.

Secondly, the sermon illumines the human situation by suggesting the shape and form of that experience.¹⁰ The sermon has an organic form that is related to the germinal idea of the message. The different artistic qualities discussed in this chapter will be incorporated by the preacher depending on the style of the sermon, whether it is basically a message, a thesis, a question, a story, or some other form; that is, the sermon, as does any expressive form, has a particular shape in time and space. Most obviously, it has a beginning and an ending. The introduction should be striking, artistic, and relevant. It should catch the congregation's attention. Ideally, the sermon also has a climax

⁹Henry Kuizenga, "The Preacher as Artist," paper delivered before a consultation, Louisville, KY, Fall 1976.

¹⁰Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), Chapter 9.

which illumines the human situation, makes the Incarnation transparent, or reveals a dimension of Christian grace and love.

Since the sermon's tools are spoken words, poetry and drama are the closest related art forms. The sermon is related to drama in at least two ways. It is a part of the worship service and therefore is framed by the liturgy. The entire liturgy is a dramatic form. Furthermore, each Sunday is a part of the larger drama of the church year. So already the sermon has an artistic edge. It is a part of a larger artistic whole. Secondly, the sermon ought to be dramatic and interesting in style. The preacher should use the techniques of drama and poetry. One must pay attention to rhythm, repetition, alliteration, sound, imagery, to all of the ingredients of verbal art.

One of the most helpful artistic techniques for preaching is that of metaphor. Sharon Emswiler discusses metaphor in relation to understanding the Bible.

The word "metaphor" literally means "to carry over." The dictionary defines it as a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, different thing by being spoken of as if it were that other. In trying to explain something we find ourselves saying that it is "like" something else, something familiar to us and to our experience. We discover then, that metaphorical language is an absolute necessity when we are trying to speak of a reality such as that with which the Bible is concerned-- a reality outside the human, physical, earthly experience which is all we humans know.¹¹

¹¹Sharon Neufer Emswiler, The Ongoing Journey: Women and the Bible (Women's Division Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 1977), p. 16.

Mrs. Emswiler is on the right track, but we would part company over her last sentence. Metaphorical, poetic language is necessary for even those deepest human experiences, else how should we resonate to the poem or metaphor as "truth" and not foolishness? It is the limits of linear language she wants to point at, not the limits of human experience.

Mrs. Emswiler continues:

All of our language about God is metaphorical. To call God "Father" or "Lord," as the Bible often does, is to carry over from one realm of experience to another. The Psalms use metaphorical language when God is called "my rock, and my fortress." . . . We must always remember that when we are speaking of spiritual realities we, of necessity, find ourselves in the realm of the metaphor.¹²

Poetry is closely related to metaphor and should also be a major constituent of the sermon. A stage review had this to say about poetry:

A friend once said that poetry is the Morse Code of the emotions. Not very original, but exact. It is the sudden transmission of a single thought or phrase in a sign language of the soul--something that rings out with a compressed honesty, a telescopic image, a remembered circuitry. A single word sometimes that can revive a long and complicated experience.¹³

Poetry has this ability to evoke response, to illumine human experience, to call forth understanding. This is how poetry enables the preacher to communicate. One needs to be aware

¹²Ibid., pp. 16-17.

¹³Sylvie Drake, "Colored": Choreopoem of Passage (a stage review), Los Angeles Times (August 12, 1977), View Section, Part IV, p. 1.

of all the techniques of poetry: word juxtaposition, alliteration, rhythm, freight words, and so forth.

Irony and paradox are important artistic devices for the Christian preacher. Our lives very much reflect a sense of the paradox. Stories and images that can make this irony self-conscious are captivating because they speak to our experience. We "feel" what it means to "open up and center down,"¹⁴ to have a "religionless Christianity,"¹⁵ or to risk everything for the sake of someone helpless.

Another artistic device that is ancient and ought to be obvious to the preacher is story telling. This was a technique of our biblical forebears and one that Jesus used frequently. In this sense such a technique is closely related to metaphor. The whole story becomes a metaphor--as with Jesus' parables. The myth or fairy story or fantasy ought to also be employed by the preacher. William Siska, in a review of the film Star Wars, says:

Entertainment of the story-telling variety has a function beyond "escape from" the pressures and ambiguities of "real life." It is what we escape to that matters and can tell us in deep ways things about ourselves that are not readily apparent, caught as we are in the hither and thither of everyday life.

He continues:

Our era is dominated by a taste for realism, and we feel ourselves constrained to judge a work of art against the

¹⁴Pierce Johnson, "A Rule for Life," Newsletter, United Church in University Place, 1:69 (September 28, 1977), 3.

¹⁵Ibid., quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 3.

measure of how "real" it is. What we often lose is our ability to appreciate the value of an idealized world wherein we are able to raise ourselves above the follies of our own predicament. Realism generally turns out to be very conservative, positing at best a grudging contentment with things as they are. Fantasy, on the other hand, is the truly revolutionary form because it celebrates the possibility of a different and better world.¹⁶

Surely this celebrating the possibility of a different and better world is also the responsibility of the sermon. The entertainment value of a good story should not be overlooked either, as shocking as this may sound. The sermon must hold the congregation's attention and interest if it is to score any point at all! Obviously, the story should relate to the sermon! Extraneous anecdotes or jokes are not what we mean here.

Imagery is closely related to poetry and metaphor. The preacher must use images that are graphic and pictural. "We live in our images."¹⁷ This statement very much relates to the concern expressed in the first chapter of this project. What we believe is most deeply connected to what our images are for God, the church, the Incarnation, grace, and other matters of life and death and human identity. Surely if these images are sharp and cut deeply into our experience, our beliefs will relate to our behavior. Therefore, these images

¹⁶William Siska, Film review of Star Wars: "A Breath of Fresh Fantasy," Christian Century XCIV:24 (July 20-27, 1977), 667.

¹⁷Ross Snyder, Workers with Youth class, School of Theology at Claremont, Summer 1960.

must be forged with concrete language, street language, teenage vernacular, with prose that is real and relevant.

It has been my delightful task to preach a "children's sermon" quite regularly this past year. It should not be surprising, though it was to me initially, what a warm response many of these "sermons" received. Why not? At their best, they are short, make one point, and are built on a single image or story or description of our very human situation to which everyone can relate. Ah, that our major efforts might do as well! We need to particularize the mystery, to make specific the Incarnation and to make grace become a reality.

Another artistic rule that is appropriate here is that of simplicity and economy. The preacher should refrain from trying to say too much at one time. Not everything worth saying can be said in each proclamation. The preacher should know her/his purpose so well that s/he makes it impossible for her/his listeners to miss the point. The Gospel point is too often and too easily missed.¹⁸ In fact, if a sermon could communicate the Gospel with one powerful image, it would be successful. There ought to be one overriding sermon idea that captures the simplicity beyond the complexities. This means that all the complexities have been wrestled with in the preparation of the sermon. This includes translations, exegesis in its broadest sense, and all of the

¹⁸Henry Kuizenga, Preaching class, School of Theology at Claremont, Fall 1976.

disciplines that the New Hermeneutic would have us bring to bear. Being effectively simple and artistically economical is very difficult and takes a great deal of work and practice.

Another artistic mode that the preacher can adapt is that of dramatic rhetoric including rhythm, emotional contrast and control, suspense and intensity, and building to a dramatic climax. Consider black preaching with its responsiveness, repetition, and build, or evangelistic preaching with its dramatic exhortations. Such styles communicate a message that may have nothing to do with the particular words spoken. But if the dramatic qualities do fit the message, the result is powerful communication. The form should fit the message! If the subject is joy, the words ought not to be dark and ponderous, but light, airy, alliterative, and joyful. The form, including the shape of the language, the rhythm, and the poetry should undergird the message. Henry Kuizenga attributes honesty, a willingness to look at the whole and to see how things fit together plus the ability to interpret things as they see them to artists. These qualities should describe the preacher as well.¹⁹

This chapter is not meant to be a "how to" summary. There are many good books and courses where the myriad of practical suggestions might be encountered. What I have briefly tried to suggest is that the sermon is a distinct and unique art form to which artistic rules, techniques, and

¹⁹Kuizenga, "The Preacher as Artist."

analysis very much apply. The sermon is an art form which can employ many artistic devices. Like any work of art, however, no definitive blueprint can be given, no precise analysis can be made, and no surefire formula is available. "The crucial factor in preaching, just as in art, cannot be taught because it must be 'given' to a person."²⁰ In the final analysis, the preacher is an artist.

²⁰M. Mezger, "Preparation for Preaching," in Translating Theology into Modern Age (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 162.

CHAPTER IV

SERMON EXAMPLES

The following are several examples of sermons I believe incorporate the lessons of the New Hermeneutic and the art forms appropriate to the sermon. Joseph Hough's was preached at the School of Theology at Claremont and to the congregation of the Claremont United Church of Christ, Congregational. The second is the author's preached to the same Congregational congregation. The third is an example of a children's sermon.

TWO BOATS ON THE WATER¹

A Sermon by Joseph C. Hough, Jr.

Boats have always played a significant and symbolic role in the history of the United States. The fires of imagination of all Americans are kindled by names like Mayflower, Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria. Particularly on the eve of the bi-centennial, these names call up visions of the search by mankind for freedom and the expansion of the understanding and the mobility of mankind to new and undreamed of horizons. Or one might remember the name of the Titanic as a symbolic expression of the vulnerability of an era of mankind which becomes too complacent and too self-assured in its relationship to nature. And so when I speak of two boats on the water today I am speaking in highly symbolic terms and I am calling you to join me in that realm of human imagination, the boundary area between fact and fantasy where creativity often arises.

There are two boats upon the water. We shall first look at one and then the other. The first boat is a lifeboat. The lifeboat is filled almost to capacity and it is surrounded by struggling swimmers in the water whose faces

¹Preached July 18, 1977, at United Church of Christ, Claremont, CA; delivered at School of Theology at Claremont; and published in Journal of Stewardship XXIX (1976).

exhibit the sort of anxiety that becomes familiar when one has been with the desperate and the dying. There is some room but there is not much room. At the bow of the boat stands a person with an oar poised in the air ready to push away those who have grasped the edge of the boat to swing themselves into safety. At the urging of those within the boat who are expressing anxious cries about their own survival possibilities, the oarsman shores up his courage, draws his muscles taut, and makes himself ready to swing.

Now we look to another sea and another time at another boat on the water. The occupants of the boat are not surrounded by desperate swimmers who are in danger of drowning. They are, to be sure, somewhat afraid because of the power and the fury of a raging sea. But nonetheless with their knowledge of the sea and their confidence in the boat itself, they are somewhat secure. Suddenly, as we look at the boat, a strange thing happens. One of the occupants of the boat leaps out into the water and starts walking across the water toward another person who has suddenly appeared walking from the land out to the sea. We see this impetuous sea walker suddenly look down to his feet and then he is overcome with stark terror as he realizes what he has done. Slowly he begins to sink into the water. The other sea walker reaches out, takes his hand, and reassures him and together they walk to the safety of the boat.

In a remarkable way these two boats symbolize experiences and perspectives before the American people as we

face the perpetual world crises that rush forward from the future toward us as a people and as a nation. It has become obvious to you by now that the first boat to which I refer is symbolic of the lifeboat ethic suggested by one Garrett Hardin in an article which recently appeared in Psychology Today. Essentially what Mr. Hardin is suggesting is that we need to take a realistic and practical look at the world situation and understand that we cannot continue to feed the hungry, to rescue the perishing, if you will, because to do so simply will add more weight to an already overloaded environment. The end result of this will be the destruction of all. Put in metaphorical terms, if you pull the drowning swimmers into the boat until you have received all the swimmers into safety, what you have created is a totally dangerous situation, and the boat sinks carrying all of those in the drama to destruction. The only possible recourse we have then, argues Mr. Hardin, is simply to deny entrance into the lifeboat of those outside the boat. Perhaps, he says in a condescending way, the poor swimmers will then learn from their folly by having seen some of their fellows drown, and will not ever again overload their own boat to the point at which it begins to sink. That means they will not again be in the precarious situation of asking mercy from those of us who are secure in our own boat with somewhat ample room and relative safety.

The stark realism with which Hardin paints the picture

of the world situation with his metaphor of the lifeboat is set in contrast to the image of spaceship earth which was originated by Barbara Ward and later popularized by Kenneth Boulding. In the spaceship earth metaphor, the idea is interdependence, and the emphasis is upon the necessity for cooperative planning and cooperative endeavor in order to keep the spaceship livable and flight-worthy. Hardin is totally dissatisfied with the spaceship image because he says no spaceship can fly without a captain, and in the absence of one to direct us or even some inclination toward world leadership to develop global policy, the only option is to view the world scene as a sea upon which a number of lifeboats are floating.

What is so shaking about this lifeboat on the waters is that it may indeed be the most appropriate metaphor for the survival prospects of any segment of humanity given our current propensities for chaos and competition, and given our current indecision with respect to global food distribution, environmental control and population control. Be that as it may, it appears to me that the lifeboat image, coming from the mouth of a privileged member of the society, is inappropriate for at least two reasons.

In the first place, it seems to me that the rather cavalier attitude with which one talks about the manipulation of the population and environmental problem through famine, plague, and other such associated miseries overlooks the

possibility of massive war and unrest and instability in an entire world which may bring the lifeboat down anyway.

Secondly, I really wonder what the image of the lifeboat will do to us psychologically and morally, irrespective of what our physical prospects may be. My guess is that from the safety of the lifeboat, a calloused disregard for persons who appear as faceless ciphers on a surging sea, may lead us finally to have little self-respect for our own selves and little semblance of humanity left in our lives. One then wonders if the world is worth preserving under those circumstances. But I do not want to argue with Mr. Hardin. I want us now to turn to look at another boat on the waters and to see what the image of that boat might be, particularly the peculiar behavior of one of the members of the crew of that boat on the waters.

One cannot understand the boat on the surging waters and the sea walkers unless one understands the immediate backdrop of this particular story in the context of the gospels. You will recall, of course, that the background of this incident is the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus had gathered by the seaside and thousands of people had followed him there to hear him teach. After he had been teaching for a period of time, one of his disciples mentioned to him that people had been there quite a long time without food and that they were probably hungry. Jesus suggested that they canvass the crowd to see how much food was available

in order to determine what next steps to take. Returning from their canvass of the situation, the disciples reported to Jesus that there was a lad there with five loaves and two fishes. Other than that, there was no food. And they query him, understandably and perhaps appropriately, "What in the world will we do with so little food to feed so many people? Perhaps we should send them away hungry."

Those of you who are concerned with the niceties of Biblical exegesis perhaps will be somewhat troubled by my handling of the text from this point on. However, it seems to me that we may indulge in some license at this point in order to continue to expand metaphorically the importance of this boat upon the waters, particularly as a contrast with the boat which Mr. Hardin has pictured for us so graphically as an appropriate metaphor for our human situation.

And so we plunge ahead. Perhaps the disciples may have mused as they brought the food to Jesus, "What we have here is essentially not much more than enough to still the pangs of hunger in our own bellies. Since there is not enough to begin to take care of the needs of the people on the hillside, why waste the food by trying to pass it out? That would be the height of folly and foolishness. If we try to share this little bit of food and flesh, what we shall do is all go away hungry and perhaps there will even be those among the crowd who might faint from weariness and hunger. So the implied suggestion is that we send them away home

without feeding them. Because after all, since we don't have the resources to feed these people, surely we cannot be responsible for distributing the limited resources that we have."

At this point a rather remarkable thing occurs. Jesus says, "Give me the five loaves and two fishes." And there before the eyes of the multitude, he blesses the food and fish and breaks it and passes it out and the disciples distribute it among the people. When they had finished eating, the disciples gathered literally baskets full of scraps left over.

Now those of you troubled by miracles might want to dismiss this incident as a case of either pure magic or certainly, if it is a miraculous occurrence, a case of super-humanity that is certainly not available to the humanity of us all as we face similar questions about how we feed the many with so little. However, before we depart from this scene with the air of hopelessness or skepticism, we might ask again what the possibilities were in this situation to see if in fact we are faced here with something that is totally mysterious or else simply fantasy. I think that it is not only possible but likely that the character of this miracle, while certainly related to the character of Jesus himself, is not unrelated to the power of sharing and faith in the face of adversity. Certainly the impact of the innocent generosity of a young child was not lost upon Jesus, the

disciples, nor any of the other persons there. Perhaps as this child came forth in all of the utter simplicity of youth and childhood to offer what he had to share with Jesus and the others, there moved among the people there a spirit which unleashed their capacity for sharing and a feeling which moved them to act beyond their normal patterns. It just could have been that many scared, anxious and frightened individuals sitting there together on the hillside with scarce food resources of their own simply could not bring themselves to break open the baskets and to share with others who might not have as much as they did. In their guilt for having food and their fear of the consequences of confessing openly and willingly to the fact of their plenty, they may have been led to a kind of grasping selfishness which prevented them from acknowledging that in fact they had resources at all. But an act of innocence, an act of child-like faith, as it so often does, broke through these barriers of anxiety and fear, selfishness and greed, and enabled those persons on that hillside to follow suit. Perhaps one by one, family by family, as the broken bread and flesh was passed among them, they added to the quantity of the supply in the first row and then the last their own meager supplies of food, only to realize that the problem had not been a scarcity of resources but the incapacity of a multitude of people to share. This moving scene, whether it be couched in the language of the mystery of grace or in the language of the mystery of

faith, is the backdrop of the scene we view when we see the second boat on the waters. Behind this slowly heaving and surging boat in the midst of an angry sea lies an experience, an overwhelming experience, of the manner in which the grace of God as manifest in Jesus Christ can break through the isolation and selfishness of mankind, bringing forth plenty out of scarcity and transforming selfishness into sharing.

This dramatic event recorded in the New Testament seems to me to point in the direction of at least three general reflections and must be part of our own rededication of ourselves as Americans in the contemporary situation. In the first place, we need to see that the beginning point for our own stance toward world need is the understanding that who we are as Americans and what we have in this nation are gifts from God. We do not own this nation nor do we own its bounty. We do not have a right to its bounty. To the community of Christians, the world is a gift and life--all of life is a gift. Therefore, the preservation of our own lives is not the primary consideration before us. What we need to attend to is our response in obedience to a call from a gracious God.

This means, secondly, that American Christians can never respond to any situation with fatalism. Our own history is a history of people who have seen and exercised options. More than that we have our freedom which is grounded and

guaranteed in the freedom of Christ. That to which we respond is a call to a radical freedom, more radical than the freedom upon which this nation was founded; and we are called to risk everything in order to respond to the command of a loving God--even to risk death for life. We have not been called to guarantee this nation or the world for posterity. We have been called to manifest grace of humanity. Our call is very simply to bring what we have and give it to Him. In hope and in the somewhat heady joy of radical freedom, then, we are called to share what we have--not with any assurance that this will save the world, but in the knowledge that the call for our five loaves and two fishes is a call of a gracious God through whom and by whom all things are made and sustained.

Thus, there must be a kind of holy madness about the lives of people in America today. In a time, when as Robert Theobald said recently: "Doing the practical thing is of all things the most impractical," we must look at the cold and rational prudence of the lifeboat and simply say that practical reason is really the handmaiden of madness. If we save our life in that boat we shall lose it for now and for generations unborn.

Now let us return to the second boat on the waters. The foolish action, the mad plunge into the sea by the impetuous fisherman, now becomes plausible. He has witnessed the power of sharing, the power which transformed a hungry

mass of humanity into a community of well-fed persons. He has witnessed the fact that the life-giving power of sharing flowed from the grace resident in Jesus Christ. Against this backdrop the action is no longer foolish. It partakes of the divine and holy madness of which we speak. For in light of what he had seen and heard, this impetuous fisherman had no fear of the sea or the storm and in one great moment of exhilaration and joy, he plunged out of the boat, walked on the water toward the Giver of Life, the source of hope, and the guarantor of freedom.

There is one more part to the story, however, and here all of us can readily identify with Simon Peter's fear. For when he saw what he had done, he began to sink into the sea in stark terror. It is a terrifying thing to offer everything to the living Lord, but Peter, like us, could rest in the assurance that a gracious hand will reach forth to pull us from the depths, stand us again on our feet, and enable us to walk through the waters of uncertainty toward a new and glorious freedom.

Comment. Hough begins his sermon with the imagery of boats and these boats carry us throughout the sermon. In his first paragraph, he is explicit about the imagery he will use, and how that imagery ought to work. "I am speaking in highly symbolic terms, and I am calling you to join me in that realm of human imagination, the boundary area

between fact and fantasy where creativity often arises."²

The boats serve throughout the sermon as a useful "pot for putting things in";³ they give shape and form to the sermon. We remember what Dr. Hough gives us to put in those boats is a summary of the competitive "life-boat ethic" and the alternative of the cooperative "spaceship-earth" concept. We are educated in the current debate concerning world hunger. It is important for the church to understand and to be involved in such urgent concerns, as individuals and as institutions. The sermon makes a call to precisely such involvement. Time is spent on thoughtful reflection about how these different solutions might affect us personally. As the sermon turns to the biblical boat, we are brought into the context of Jesus and Peter walking on the water with all of the background and exegesis necessary for real understanding. Comparisons are obvious. The point is the "power of sharing and faith in the face of adversity." The point is made very clearly and with dramatic, artistic finesse.

The New Hermeneutic theologians would be proud of Hough. The exegetical possibilities are suggested. We understand what the biblical story is all about, and we see how it applies to us.

Finally, we are presented with a relevant and

²Hough's sermon, p. 1.

³John Rice, "The Use of Expressive Form in Parish Ministry" (Unpublished Rel.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1975), p. 31.

unabashed description of the grace of God and miracle of faith. With both solid material to ponder and an artistic vehicle, hope is extended then and there. A choice is made possible as we listen to the last paragraphs and identify (or not) with Peter and the preacher. This is neither a lecture on world economics nor a simplistic, sentimental rendering of a biblical story. It is a sermon!

WE ELDERS: WARTHOGS FROM HELL⁴

A Sermon by Mary Ellen Kilsby

The scripture this morning from the Gospels is a very famous chapter from Luke--a fabulous chapter, three stories about God's care. The prodigal son is the most famous. You mention the prodigal son to anyone and they know what you are talking about. They are able to feel what Luke is describing. The story is only in Luke and the setting in Luke is important, too. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees. In the chapter just previous to this is the story of the banquet where everyone is invited and the Pharisees do not come. In this chapter, again, they cut themselves off from the love of God. It is not what they are doing. It is not that they are good and dutiful. It is their attitude that condemns them. They're unloving and hypocritical. You see one of Luke's points is that the kingdom of God will include even the Gentiles, even the sinners, even those outside the law, and the Pharisees had better come to grips with that! As a matter of fact they had better even start rejoicing in that. The Pharisees, of course, are mad at Jesus. They are angry with him because he has broken the conventional limits. They are angry that he not only proclaims the love of God to

⁴Preached September 25, 1977, United Church of Christ, Claremont, California.

these sinners and outsiders, he acts on that. He is sitting there eating with these people, which in the Jewish tradition is the most intimate form of fellowship, and that banquet, that table, represents the most intimate fellowship with God.

Now, I don't know about you, but I really relate to that elder brother. I was an elder sister and I have a hunch that my sister would relate to that elder brother too, even though she may be the youngest. I have a hunch that you, that we in the upper class protestant main-line denominations, if we are honest, really relate to that elder brother.

Let me suggest some characteristics often attributed to the eldest and see if there aren't just one or two that you might have to claim for your own: security minded, serious, critical, legalistic, prideful. We are not like other people. We are not wasting our lives--self-satisfied, virtuous, and oh so self-righteous. We are good people! We are doing our duty. We are legally and morally righteous, maybe a little suspicious of frivolity, selfish, a little neurotically compulsive, competitive, jealous. We sit here as middle class protestants just like that older brother who, in keeping with custom, got 2/3 of the share of his father's property. Finally, I really relate to the elder brother's resentment over that party. You know how it feels to work hard at something and have someone swish in and walk off with the award or with the compliments. You know what it's

like to be an athlete and really work hard and have someone come along that has hardly trained at all and they win. You know how it feels to grind away and the returning relative gets all the attention. You know how angry and resentful you can feel. I really relate to that older brother.

Now, what becomes of the prodigal son? We all know. But what is to become of us elder brothers? Whatever is to become of us all? If we are so righteous, how are we going to experience salvation? I think a lot of our young people are saying to us today that while they don't want to give up their intellectualism, while they want to have the doubts, they want to be questioning; but they want to have some experience that relates a little bit to their evangelical brothers and sisters. They want to know something about being saved. Don't you have to be lost to be found? Isn't that deep conversion experience more dramatic and powerful? We all know converts and/or reformed alcoholics who can really be excited about where and who they are. How do we elder brothers experience redemption? Today I am suggesting that the answer lies to a great extent with our imagination. Imagination--to see how far we really do fall short, to what extent our guilt really does extend. Imagination--to understand that ours is the deeper sin, more subtle, harder to get at. For starters, take some of the corporate kind of sins: the holocaust, Auschwitz, the Vietnam War, the gobbling up of 2/3 of our world resources faster than we can

blink an eye, racism, sexism. It takes imagination to personalize those sins! Maybe it takes imagination to personalize, to realize even our personal sins. I read a list of them with the elder brother. Look at us in Claremont: critical, smug, prideful. We seem to expect everything so easily, everything we have. We need humility so deeply to understand how much we owe to others. Greed. We want so many things, but more than just things. I suspect our sin is wanting happiness, academic grants, security, success. We even want our children to be successful in a particular pattern. Maybe we even want too much assurance; but seeing this, feeling this, really takes imagination. It takes coming to ourselves like that younger brother did. It may be tougher for us.

And then I think it takes imagination for us to develop ways of expressing the forgiveness of God to one another. We need someone to run to meet us much as that younger kid did. We need imagination for this church to develop ways of celebrating salvation. Maybe we can start with potlucks. Remember what I said about eating; it's not just fun together. It is a way of becoming intimate with God and with each other. It is a way to celebrate our salvation. And as an aside, I think there are some really practical results from that, too. I think that we do a better job at social action--a better job of laying off of our children. A better job of not spending so much time worrying about grubby details or being

jealous of somebody else. We need to learn how to run to one another with expressions of grace.

In order to sensitize our imaginations to understand our guilt and to celebrate our salvation, we had better let our artists, our Shakespeares, Tennessee Williams, Bachs, Beatles, Picassos, and maybe even Woody Allens, do two things. First, hold up a mirror. You don't have to murder a king to understand MacBeth's jealousy. We need to let our artists hold up mirrors so that we can really come to ourselves so that we can really see and understand what's going on. Maybe our artists can also hold up a looking glass with possibilities of a better world.

The elder brother in the story is a good person, but he refuses to come to the banquet. Elder brothers, we Pharisees, alienate ourselves from God's love. We are excluded by our own exclusiveness. The father pleads with the elder son. Ah, my fellow elder brothers, don't let's let our pride keep us from coming to the party. We need the food. We need the banquet. We need that celebration as badly as that kid brother.

One of my favorite authors, as some of you know, is Flannery O'Connor and she has written a short story called "Revelation"⁵ that I think says what I am trying to say

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in her The Complete Stories (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Geroux, 1946), p. 448.

very well. Mrs. Turpin is a very good woman. She gives to the poor. She is involved in her church and she is very much like we are--a real Pharisee. She is from the south where all Flannery O'Connor stories are set, and she is sitting in the doctor's office when a very ugly young girl throws a book at her and calls her a "wart hog from hell." (Interesting how these swine and hogs get into the picture all the time, isn't it?) But Mrs. Turpin, and please God let us, Mrs. Turpin has imagination and she knows somehow that a message is meant for her, some way, somehow. She is not quite sure how but she is arguing with her Lord about that. She is out watering down her pigs (obviously, her pigs are the cleanest in the neighborhood) and she says, "What do you send me a message like that for? . . . How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too? . . . How much am I a hog?" she demands. "Exactly how am I like them?" The pasture was glowing a particularly glossy mysterious green. "Go on," she cried, "call me a hog! . . . Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!" A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, "Who do you think you are?" But as I said, Mrs. Turpin has imagination and she has a vision. She looks up into a crimson sky and she sees a purple streak like a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it are vast hordes of souls rumbling toward heaven. "There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the

first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like forgs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claude, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closely. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away." Oh, God, give us the imaginations to see even our virtues being burned away. Give us grace to bring up the rear. You see, it can be different in staying home. There can be joy and thanksgiving in doing what we are called to do. We are not martyrs. We could walk away from it anytime we wanted, so let there be joy in the staying home! Let there be joy in the working of the vineyard. The miracle of grace can extend even to us Pharisees for God's mercy knows no limit. Amen.

Comment. In the sermon, We Elders, the image the congregation is asked to identify with is that of the elder brother, those people, like most of us, who "stay home." Rather extensive exegesis is done. The background is painted, details are explained, and what scholars believe Jesus was getting at in the story of the Prodigal Son is propounded.

At this point the congregation is asked to identify with the Pharisees, the elder brother. The question becomes, whatever shall become of us who stay at home?

The congregation is asked to use their collective imaginations and to feel the weight of their corporate and personal sins. This is the judgment element. All the way through the sermon, metaphors are used suggestively. We need to "run to one another" not simply "express forgiveness."

The sermon concludes with one of Flannery O'Connor's stories which the preacher felt illustrated the attitude of the Pharisees very well. Two stories, one biblical and one contemporary, are told, both saying the same thing. O'Connor's story is fun to tell and very powerful. The author ends on a note of grace--and so does the preacher. The benediction used in the service picked up the conclusion of the sermon and underscored the last words of grace.

ON BEING SCARED

A Children's Sermon by Mary Ellen Kilsby

Tomorrow is the first day of school. For some of you, it will be a whole new school, new teachers, new faces. For some of you, this may be even a new town and you face a new year needing to make all new friends. For all of you it will mean new classrooms, new teachers and a new situation. And you know what? That's scary! Do you realize that every one of us is scared about tomorrow? Some of us maybe only a little bit frightened (maybe we know who our teacher will be), but some of us are really scared. And we all know how that feels!

Did you ever stop to realize that your teacher is scared, too? She is! She may be teaching for the first time, or be in a new school or have a new grade--or even just having a new class (you are all new to her, too). That's scary!

Did you know that every time David Held gets up to preach, he's a little frightened? And, there's a brand new President (president--imagine!) at the School of Theology and I'll bet you that he's scared!

Tomorrow is a big day and we are all at least a little frightened. And that's O.K. because that is how we grow. If we are never frightened about tomorrow, I assure you

there will never be anything very exciting or interesting happening to us.

We all know how it feels to be scared, and it's all-right to be scared, but the most important thing to remember is that God is always with us. We never have to be frightened alone. God knows how we feel and God loves us and is right there with us. . . . She really is!

Comment. A well-done, brief sermon is often long remembered because it identifies with the listeners, in this case children, and makes only one point or uses only one image. In this example, "Be ye not afraid" is made very immediate. Tomorrow is the first day of school. We are all scared, even the teacher, and that is O.K. because to grow we need to be unsure sometimes. The important thing is that God is always with us. Adults and children alike related very much to these few sentences.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The New Hermeneutic gives us a sound theological and philosophical basis for preaching the Word of God. It also provides guidelines and directions for proceeding from the text to the proclamation. The New Hermeneutic demands that the preacher make all of the preliminary preparations: translations, text criticism, finding the key to the text, exposition of the text, and application of the text.¹ The New Hermeneutic also suggests guidelines and directions for communicating our exegetical work. We are urged to make the original point fresh and real to today's listeners. Simply recalling what the text meant to the people of old, however helpful, is not enough. The preacher must also struggle with how this is relevant to the problems of today.

It is our artists, however, who are much more helpful at this point. It is with an analysis of artistic communication that we can see more clearly what the New Hermeneutic theologians are attempting to say about the manner and style of proclamation. The two disciplines together provide the inspired preacher all the tools s/he needs.

¹M. Mezger, "Preparation for Preaching," in Translating Theology into Modern Age (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 161.

Sometimes the two disciplines are really talking about the same thing, although perhaps from different sides of the coin. For example, artists talk about our symbols or images being "transparent" and the New Hermeneutic talks about "illumination of the text." Paul Tillich puts it this way: ". . . The Word of God as the word of revelation is transparent language. Something shines through ordinary language which is the self-manifestation of the depth of being and meaning."² As was suggested earlier, this is often the way Tillich needs to be read himself--poetically! Artists talk about shape and form and these theologians are concerned about "self-consistency."

The New Hermeneutic refers to "God speaking to me in this way." "God spoke to Hosea thusly, and I hear God speaking to me this way." Our sermons ought to use whatever artistic communication best fits to share what we hear and to enable our congregations to hear as well. Both the philosophers of art and the theologians of the New Hermeneutic understand that artistic, authentic language has the power to "Call into Being" that which is. It is possible to make God's love and grace truly present. When the New Hermeneutic talks about authentic, accurate language, the meaning is the same as when artists insist that you cannot "talk about" love or grace, but must communicate that in expressive form.

²Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, 124.

The theologians we have discussed in this paper insist that God not be represented, but be re-presented. Authentic, accurate language, then, is not scientific, discursive, linear language by which we try to capture God or to analyze grace. "In preaching, there is no such thing as just 'talking about' anything."³ In other words, the New Hermeneutic thrust is making the same points as our artists.

Buford Dickinson indicates that Tillich says essentially the same thing. In discussing Tillich, Dickinson says, "A word can become the Word of God if it seizes the human mind with such power and force that an ultimate concern is brought into being."⁴ For Tillich, the criteria for such an ultimate concern are the Bible and Jesus Christ.

As further illustration of this, recall William Siska's point about fantasy being a "revolutionary art form"⁵ and Barry Woodbridge's point that preaching requires "subversive language."⁶ Harvey Cox uses the image of a "story to live by."⁷ These thrusts, it seems to me, give the preacher

³Henry Kuizenga, informal note to the student, January 1978.

⁴Buford Allen Dickinson, "The Concept of Communication in the Thought of Paul Tillich" (Unpublished Rel.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1967), p. 20.

⁵William Siska, Film Review of Star Wars: "A Breath of Fresh Fantasy," Christian Century XCIV:24 (July 20-27, 1977), 666-668.

⁶Barry A. Woodbridge, "Preaching as Subversive Language," Christian Century XCI:5 (February 6, 1974).

⁷Harvey Cox, The Seduction of the Spirit (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 9.

the clues s/he needs in order to prepare the sermon we dreamed about in our Introduction. The people of God are able to choose or to appropriate a past, but they need to hear their story. The people of God can be open to the future, but the choices must be confronted. The ideal world or kingdom of God must become part of our authentic language. The Christian drama of sin and salvation must make the people the actors by the inspiring direction of the preacher.

Artists deal with symbols and we have mentioned that one of the qualities of a symbol is its tentative or abstract nature, its ability to point to or be open toward the future. This is very much what the New Hermeneutics are trying to say about language, that it is appropriate language that can indeed create the future. Imagination depends on language, and language that uses imagination creates possibilities for the future. Perhaps the artists are less sure that they are creating that future than these theologians are, or maybe it is only a question of emphasis. The New Hermeneutic does want to stress humankind's responsibility in our use of language, but at the same time they do admit that we are not entirely in control. The New Hermeneutic lays particularly heavy responsibility on the poet and preacher for their use of the Word.

It is important for the Christian community that the sermon bring into focus our ever-changing future. We need to proclaim the possibility of newness every moment to reveal

the continuing process of God's redemption, and to proclaim that God is at work among us. Then, if the sermon has demonstrated this grace that is so radical and available, a response is possible that can make a difference to one's life.

For this to happen, we need new words, new symbols, new vitality and new life in our worship and in our proclamations. Traditional language, for many, only obscures. Perhaps this means recapturing meanings in some of the old forms, images, or language. Only by working among the people will the preacher understand what the needs are, what images speak powerfully, what issues are relevant, what symbols can communicate the faith, and what language will best communicate the theological issues and historical problems. The preacher must understand why these problems are relevant and then show how this is so.

This does not mean that the sermon has all the answers, if, indeed, that were possible! Nor can the sermon explain everything. But the poetry and symbols used in the sermon ought to point to our meanings, illumine human experience, and deepen our insights. Perhaps the preacher's limitations are a part of the message. Human experience is not, after all, a very neat package. A sense of humor about our human predicament can go a long way toward keeping us from making our visions of reality absolute!

One of the reasons that the New Hermeneutic is called "new" is that it is recapturing the artistic dimensions of

exegesis that had been lost since 1930. With the loss of an artistic sensitivity, the ability to communicate what was of greatest importance was also lost. Today, the New Hermeneutic's definition of the Word-Event at least includes what the sermon ought to be: an artistic convincing proclamation that "calls into being" God's love and grace, a freeing of the text to become God's word again today.

It is within such a context that we must educate the people! Our history must be presented if it is to be appropriated. Issues must be searched out in order that they not be denied. Lives must be touched in order to be transformed. For preaching to become "the Word of God," it must reach into the listener's existence and "subvert," "revolve," "renew" that existence.

To a certain extent, it must be admitted that the New Hermeneutic helps us only indirectly with the problem of the sermon and theological education. The New Hermeneutic's emphasis is on achieving simplicity, vividness, and power in the sermon. The question relevant for the New Hermeneutist is, "How to communicate the Gospel today?" Buford Dickinson puts the hermeneutical approach thusly: "The burden of preaching is to articulate the Gospel in such a way that the experience which gives birth to the Biblical text is reproduced in the lives of modern hearers."⁸ The difference the preacher is

⁸Buford Allen Dickinson, "The Hearing of the Word" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1976), p. 34.

to make is in the lives of the congregation, their mode of human existence. The argument made in this paper is that belief systems do influence our behavior, our lives. Therefore, particular truth claims, outmoded symbols, sexist or power images/language, need to be dealt with in the sermon as effectively as the Scripture itself. The sermon, in elucidating Scripture, must deal with the concepts suggested by that Scripture--an omnipotent God, Christ the King, God incarnate, the sacrifice on the cross, and so forth, with every artistic vehicle employable by and appropriate to the sermon. At times this might mean explaining how the concept relates and why it is important. Often this will mean freeing the people of old baggage that is no longer helpful to our understanding of God and the Word, and hence a hurdle to their Christian commitment.

Finally, after all is said and done, no sermon will say it all or will say it with perfect beauty or grace. It may be well for the preacher to remember Corita Kent's admonishment not to create and analyze at the same time.⁹ The important thing is still the preacher's own belief and trust and experience of Grace. If one is moved, it is possible to move others because the Holy Spirit is poured through very human vessels. Jack Coogan is fond of saying that God sent us

⁹ John Rice, "Use of Expressive Form in Parish Ministry" (Unpublished Rel.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1975), p. 62, quoting Kent.

Jesus, not a pitch pipe.¹⁰ Likewise, God sent us Jesus, not a sermon outline. If we, with Paul, can preach Christ crucified, our poetry will be sufficient. Barry Woodbridge concludes in his thesis "The Preacher as Shepherd of Existence" that something happens "ex opere operato."¹¹ Surely preachers are called to proclaim the Gospel with as much hermeneutical preparation, imagination, and artistic communication as we possibly can, and then we must trust in God and be faithful. We ourselves must trust the power of those realities to which our sermon points. Let us not even despair when we are sure we have failed! The Holy Spirit is still at loose in the world, and "God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph."¹²

¹⁰Coogan quoted in *ibid.*, p. 76. The author has also heard Coogan make this statement on several occasions.

¹¹Barry A. Woodbridge, "The Preacher as a Shepherd of Existence" (Unpublished D.Min. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1973): an old idea he suggests Protestant preachers ought to be comfortable with.

¹²W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," in Marvin Halverson (ed.) Religious Drama (New York: Living Age Books, 1957).

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